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San Francisco/Duncan Scott & Marshall, 85
Post Street □ Chicago/Gravenhorst & As-
sociates, 873 Forest Hill Road, Lake Forest
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and service mark owned exclusively by The
Diners Club, Inc. ■ An edition of The Diners
Club Magazine is published in Athens, Bom-
bay, Bogota, Brussels, London, Manila, Mel-
bourne, Mexico City, Paris, Rio de Janeiro,
Tokyo.

DINERS CLUB OFFICES

New York: 10 Columbus Circle, New York,
N.Y. 10019, Circle 5-1500; Chicago: 224
North Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois
60601, RA 6-2775; Los Angeles: Gateway
West, Suite 700, Century City, Los Angeles,
Calif. 90067, 277-1500.

Other U. S. Offices:

2273 Kalakaua, Suite 212, Honolulu, Hawaii,
938-408; 420 Lincoln Road, Miami Beach,
Florida, JE 2-5539; Penn Sheraton Hotel,
Lobby Level, Pittsburgh, Pa., CO 1-1007; Jack
Tar Hotel, Van Ness and Geary Streets, San
Francisco, Calif., GR 4-8722; 91 Yonge St.,
Toronto, Canada, EM 3-9545.

Published twelve times yearly by The Diners
Club, Inc., 10 Columbus Circle, New York,
N. Y. 10019. Alfred Bloomingdale, President
and Chairman of the Board. One dollar paid
annual subscription to Signature—the Diners
Club Magazine; two dollars in Canada,
Puerto Rico, and Hawaii. Publication Office:
2201 Haskell Ave., Lawrence, Kansas. Second
class postage paid at Lawrence, Kansas, and
at additional mailing offices.

CHANGE OF ADDRESS: SUBSCRIBERS—
Please send change of address to The Diners
Club office handling your account. Magazine
address change will be made automatically.

POSTMASTER—Please mail form 3579 no-
tices to: Circulation Manager, Diners Club
Magazine, 10 Columbus Circle, New York,
New York 10019.

For editorial and advertising information,
contact: Business Manager, Signature—the
Diners Club Magazine, 10 Columbus Circle,
New York City, New York 10019, Circle

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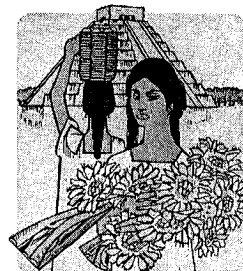


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GEMINI 74

THE SHORT SHORT / by Jack Ritchie

“We are about to initiate the first chess game ever to be played in orbit,” Orloff declared.

It was our 22d circuit and for the time being, we had nothing major to do.

“I don’t know a damn thing about the game,” I said.

Orloff fastened the small traveling chessboard securely to the panelboard between us. “But at least you are acquainted with how the pieces may be manipulated, are you not? I will give you the White and let you make the opening move.”

I stifled a yawn and moved my king’s pawn to four. Orloff duplicated my move with the Black. “This is a routine flight, is it not?”

I nodded. “It’s been done before.”

That was one way of putting it. Personally, I rather liked Orloff, but the simple fact remained that neither of our countries trusted the other enough to give away anything new, technical or tactical. However, flights like this one looked good on paper and made a lot of people feel happy about the international situation.

Orloff smiled. “To liven up this otherwise routine flight, we do, however, have a new situation. Who will be the first person to win a chess game in orbit? An American? A Russian?”

I shrugged. “Big deal.”

Orloff was mildly offended. “To a Russian, chess is not just a game. It is a way of life.”

“And if you win, you might get a medal?” I sighed and studied the board. Finally, I moved my knight to king’s bishop three.

Orloff shifted the black knight to queen’s bishop three.

I moved my bishop to queen’s knight five.

“Do you know what you just did?” Orloff asked.

“No. What?”

“That is a ‘Ruy Lopez.’ An opening which dates back to the 17th century.”

“Is that right?” I said. “It could happen to anybody.”

“I know,” Orloff responded, “but we chess players like to give things names.” Orloff glanced at the command clock and reached for the data chart. “I have forgotten to make a flight entry. Move my piece to Ng6, will you?”

I moved the black knight to bishop three.

Orloff’s eyes clouded with a sudden thought. “How did you know what Ng6 meant?”

I scratched an ear. “I think I read about it someplace.”

It seems that English-speaking countries use the descriptive notation for their moves, while just about everybody else uses the algebraic. The files of the board, from White’s left to right, are named a,b,c,d,e,f,g and h. The ranks are numbered from 1 to 8, from the White side to the Black side. Thus, Orloff’s Ng6 would be knight to king’s bishop three.

Orloff’s eyes narrowed. “I have the suspicion that I 28 have on board what you Americans call a ringer. I thought

you said—and I quote—‘I don’t know a damn thing about the game.’”

I cleared my throat. “I really don’t. I was speaking comparatively. I’m no Fischer . . . or Ivkov . . . or Smyslov.”

Orloff smiled tightly. “But at least you know that they are not soccer players.” Orloff glared at the board. “I wish Metchnikov were here instead of me. Among us, he is the No. 1 chess player. However, I am the No. 1 astronaut of our team and this received prime consideration for the flight.”

I reached for my king and castled. Orloff frowned in concentration.

After 15 minutes, I said, “It’s your move.”

“This I know,” Orloff snapped. “Do not rush me.”

Six minutes later, Gemini 74 control from Cape Kennedy came in on schedule. Metchnikov had the mike. “What is happening up there?” he asked.

“We are playing chess,” Orloff replied. “The first game in orbit.”

“Oh?” Metchnikov said. “And you are winning?”

“I don’t know,” Orloff murmured. “Perhaps I underestimated my opponent.”

“Hm . . .” There was a pause and then Metchnikov spoke again. “Perhaps for the benefit of those on the ground, you could describe your moves thus far? The world is waiting.”

“I know,” Orloff agreed and recited the moves.

“Hm,” Metchnikov repeated. “Well, I wish you the best of luck.” Then he seemed to think of something else. “Oh, by the way, Orloff, about that letter to your uncle *Dimitri* which you left on your dresser in your room? You may cease to worry. I mailed it at six this morning.”

Dimitri, I thought. Six. d6?

It was.

Orloff made the move, looked at me, and blushed.

I shook my head sadly. “Even in a chess game you feel that winning is so important that . . .”

Ground control center came in loud and clear and I recognized the voice of Dr. Wickerson, who won the base chess tournament last year. “Say, Jerry,” he said to me. “Your sister tells me that her *dahlias* are wilting. Did you forget to spray them?”

Dahlias? Forget? d4?

I had barely made the move when Metchnikov was back on the air again.

“Orloff!” he cried. “Didn’t you enjoy the picnic on the beach? Wasn’t it . . . ah . . . *divine* when we ate there?”

It was bd8, of course.

Orloff’s face was absolutely red.

I snapped off ground control. “We will do our own playing up here, Orloff.”

It wasn’t until our seventh game that I finally became the first man ever to win a chess match in orbit.

Stephanie Orloff, of course, was the first woman. ☐